

Sunday, January 24, 2016 - Epiphany 3C

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Grand Rapids

The Rev. Nurya Love Parish

My kids are 14 and 11 now. As they move into the teenage years it's harder to find things that all of us want to do together. The things that were easy hits when they were preschool and elementary age - things like crafts or cooking - are mostly off the table. It's completely normal, but it as a mom I keep thinking I'd still like to find a shared activity we all enjoy.

Which is how I found myself watching the fifth movie in the Harry Potter series. I'm not much of a movie person, but movies are still a hit for my kids, and I'm willing to go along. I couldn't help noticing that the series was a return to the classic theme of good vs. evil. The good guy was clear - Harry Potter. The bad guy was clear - Voldemort. Because J.K. Rowling understands the human experience, the two are connected. There were moments when it appeared the villain would win and Potter would lose. But by the end, good had triumphed over evil. Just like it does whenever we go to the movies.

Look at the biggest box-office hits of 2015. What were they? Star Wars: the Force Awakens. Good vs evil in outer space. Jurassic World: Good vs evil with

genetically engineered dinosaurs. And Avengers: Age of Ultron. Good vs evil with superheroes.

We watch these stories of good vs evil because this drama is the one at the center of our own lives. In most movies, you know exactly whom to root for. The good guys and bad guys are clear. Once we get out of the movie theatre, that clarity is gone. People do what appears to be good only to cause irreparable harm. Nobody intended that children would be poisoned with lead when Flint was originally moved to a new water source. And yet we now know with awful clarity that this was exactly the long-term consequence.

None of us is making choices about the water system of an entire city. But each of us makes countless choices every single day. Finding the wisdom to know the good and the discipline to choose the good are central to the life of faith.

What does Holy Scripture teach us about the epic struggle of good vs. evil? Today's lesson from the gospel contains some truth we need. But we cannot read this gospel lesson on its own. This lesson is the pinnacle of two different movements in Scripture: one that reaches all the way back to Deuteronomy. We can't find the wisdom in it unless we see it in context. First let's see what is going on in Luke's gospel.

This is Luke 4, right? So it's pretty early in the story. Pretty much only three things have happened before we get to this chapter: Jesus was born. Jesus was

baptized. Jesus was tempted in the desert by the devil. And to understand this passage, you need to see it as part of that bigger story.

This story begins at Jesus' baptism when he is named beloved and Child of God. And then Jesus goes out to the desert to be tempted by the devil. What does the personification of evil tempt Jesus with? He tempts Jesus to seek only his own self-interest.

The devil offers him the ability to turn stones into bread, never be hungry again. Jesus says no.

The devil offers him ownership of every earthly kingdom - the chance to be emperor, to have all earthly power. Jesus says no.

The devil offers him invulnerability, the ability to risk any injury and never be harmed. Jesus says no.

Now think about it. Wouldn't you love to always have enough to eat because you could pick up a rock and turn it into a meal? To always have enough money because you could tap the treasury of every government on earth? To always be safe because if you fell, angels would grab you before you got hurt? Those are tempting offers.

But hopefully a little voice inside your head is saying, "No, that's dangerous. No human being should have that much power. That belongs only to God." That's

exactly what Jesus said - he told the devil that as a mortal human being, he would claim none of it. He said no to it all.

And then the very next piece of the story is the lesson we come to today. Here's what Jesus says yes to. Here's what he says his ministry is about. It's about making the wrongs of the world right. It's about good news for poor people. It's about sight for blind people. It's about release for captive people and freedom for oppressed people. Jesus says no to the devil. He says yes to the word of God that Isaiah taught before him and the prophets have preached since antiquity.

We have been baptized into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In that baptism we were named Beloved. Child of God. Just like Jesus, we are tempted by the devil, who lures us to put ourselves in God's place. The drama of our lives is learning to say no to that temptation and yes to the work of God. We are called to grow in wisdom, to know the good. To grow in discipline, to choose the good. We are called to line up our lives with the no and yes of Jesus.

I need to tell you one more thing about the yes of Jesus. It's that last sentence in Isaiah that he quotes, when he says, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." and then he goes on to say, "This Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The year of the Lord's favor is a very specific thing in the prophecy of Isaiah. It's a reference to an old teaching from God. It goes all the way back to the days when the people of Israel are first settling in the land of promise. At that time God says to the people - ok, I get it that you are going to have an unequal society because that's how people are. (This is a loose translation.) But every seven years you have to restore equity. You have to set your slaves free, every seven years. You have to forgive debts, every seven years. You have to let the land rest, every seven years. Every seven times seven years is a year of Jubilee, a year of the Lord's favor. And in those Jubilee years, once a generation, I am going to provide for you even more than I did the Garden of Eden. You will eat from the wildness of the land. And everybody will be at rest and can rejoice.

This is the prophecy Jesus says has been fulfilled. And he goes on to prove it. He restores sight to the blind. He brings good news to the poor. He provides food for the hungry and heals the sick and eats with the outcast. It freaks out the people in charge so much that they kill him for it. But the story does not end there. God triumphs. Christ is risen, he is risen indeed. And he has empowered us with the Holy Spirit to continue his ministry. That story has not ended yet, and you and I belong to it. We belong to the story of God's people, the greatest story ever told.

We don't live in a movie. We live in Michigan, one of the best places on earth and one of the best examples of a place where justice needs to roll down like

water and righteousness like a mighty stream. Where it's long past time for the barriers of poverty and racial inequity to be lifted, those like myself who have been blinded by privilege to recover our sight, and the year of the Lord's favor to be proclaimed. Each of us is needed for the task. May Christ provide us the wisdom to know what is good and the discipline to choose it, come what may. May we join in the no and the yes of Jesus.